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In this discussion of the purposes and organization of institutional research, three major kinds of research in higher education are identified—

1. Studies of status, i.e., descriptions of current practices and conditions.
2. Studies of trends, particularly historical sequences.
3. Evaluative studies, which compare the outcomes of different policies and procedures

Lists the following basic patterns in the organization of the institutional research program in a college or university—

1. The comprehensive institutional self-study or survey, usually "one time" or at long intervals.
2. A diffused assignment of small responsibilities for research studies to some of the regular staff members of the institution.
3. The faculty committee on institutional research.
4. The office of institutional research as a part of the central administrative structure of the college or university.

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II. The Purpose and Organization of Institutional Research

. . . . . John Dale Russell

Institutional research only recently has been recognized as a major need and function in American Higher Education. At the few colleges where there is a real institutional research program, it is usually even newer than, say, Federal contract research, the housing of married students, or technical cooperation missions abroad.

In this paper I will discuss, necessarily in very summary fashion, some main points about the purpose and organization of institutional research.

Research in the whole field of education is relatively new and developed principally during the Twentieth Century. The universities first did research on problems of education in the public schools, elementary and secondary, and on school administration.

Progressive city school systems began to establish research bureaus, shortly after World War I, to work on their problems. State departments of public instruction also began to establish bureaus of research in the early 1920's, to work on the problems of the elementary and secondary schools.

Institutions of higher education, however, have been relatively slow in establishing offices for the investigation of their own problems and operations by research methods. The whole idea of a research approach to the problems of operating an institution of higher education still does not have wide acceptance. Industry, in contrast to higher education, relies heavily on research to guide its development.

But pressures of expanding enrollments and mounting costs of higher education are forcing many institutions to do research in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their operations. It is uncertain how rapidly such institutional research will develop. Within the personnel of higher education there is great resistence to change and an attitude of suspicion toward research on problems in this field.

The Research Approach

The basic drive in research is to find the facts and to understand them. Research is not only motivated by curiosity, but often by the

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firm belief that "it could be done better." This is closely akin to "invention."

Objectivity is the keynote of research. Interpretation of the facts may produce differences of opinion, especially on key issues in a field like higher education. But objective research can substitute facts for myths and clear analysis for cloudy prejudices.

There are three major kinds of research in higher education:

1. Studies of status, i.e., descriptions of current practices and conditions.

2. Studies of trends, particularly historical sequences.

3. Evaluative studies, which compare the outcome of different policies and procedures.

Much research has the objective of improving prediction and thus, ultimately, having an effect on human behavior. Institutional research can be expected to cause changes in higher education; this helps explain the resistence to it in major segments of higher education.

In considering institutional research, it is helpful to use the customary distinction between the two broad areas of "basic" (or fundamental) research, and "applied" research.

This distinction can be misused, since there is no agreed-upon, sharp line between the two categories. But it is important to note that most institutional research falls into the category of applied research.

The Nature of Institutional Research

Basic research is carried on solely in the spirit of inquiry, without regard to any practical use or application of its results. There are very few places in the United States (or in the world, for that matter) where any basic research is being done on higher education, except as it may arise out of institutional research.

The major centers where some basic research is done on higher education are:

1. The U. S. Office of Education.

2. A few of the endowed foundations (usually they make grants for specific projects).

3. The accrediting associations (probably less than in the past).

4. A limited number of universities.

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Applied research is directed toward some immediately or ultimately useful application. Often, research on some practical problems results in generalizations that are of much wider application than the problem to which it was originally directed. And sometimes the search for an answer to a practical problem requires supplementary research on the techniques of investigation or even the invention of new techniques. It is in these ways that some basic research on higher education arises out of applied institutional research.

Institutional research is a form of applied research. The initiation of a research project of this type is nearly always stimulated by the desire to find an answer to some practical problem. (E.g., why do so many of our students leave college before they earn a degree?)

The results of institutional research often have application beyond the immediate institutional setting in which the research is conducted. Generalizations from studies may be verified by repeating them in different institutional settings. Many institutional research studies should be published, so that the findings can be made generally available. We are seriously lacking at present in facilities for collecting, and, especially, synthesizing the results of research studies in higher education.

Institutional research is directed toward important problems of the individual institution. But there is a tendency also to assign to the institutional research agency, where this has been set up as a separate office, the responsibility of answering all questionnaires and making statistical reports. This is not "research," if it involves only the compilation of readily available data. (Much could be said about the questionnaire nuisance.)

One can raise a question about the point at which the routine collection of data ceases to be research.

The first time the data are organized to point toward the solution of a problem, it is properly considered a research project. Repetition of previous studies to improve techniques is also a legitimate use of research talent. Interpretations of trends from repeated studies may also involve a research approach.

But the mere repetition of a study that is needed annually in the ordinary process of administering an institution ceases to be research. The data may still be very useful for administrative purposes, but research talent is not needed to collect and analyze the data.

Thus, one of the functions of the research agency in the institution is continually to work itself out of a job, farming out routinized studies to other agencies in the institution, and constantly developing new areas on which research seems likely to be profitable.

John Dale Russell

The Organization of the Institutional Research Program in a College or University

At least four basic patterns may be distinguished in the organization of institutional research:

1. The comprehensive institutional self-study or survey, usually "one time" or at long intervals.

2. A diffused assignment of small responsibilities for research studies to some of the regular staff members of the institution.

3. The faculty committee on institutional research.

4. The office of institutional research as a part of the central administrative structure of the college or university.

The office of institutional research is generally headed by a director responsible to the president or some other high-level official of the institution, such as a vice-president or provost. The office of institutional research exercises a staff function, not a line function.

Research under such an organization tends to be administration-oriented, and suggestions for projects originate commonly with the members of the administrative staff.

The four kinds of organization are not mutually exclusive, but may exist in various combinations. For example, some institutional research offices have a faculty advisory committee. This can be useful not only in gaining faculty cooperation on certain kinds of research but in getting suggestions for needed studies.

Also, the office of institutional research can encourage an orderly, rather than diffuse, assignment of research responsibilities to regular staff members of the institution.

It is important that the work of institutional research be adequately supported by budgeted funds. This is facilitated by the organization of a definite office of institutional research.

The office of institutional research should be attached at a high administrative level (president or vice president), so that:

a. It can have access to all necessary institutional data;

b. It can deal broadly with problems in any phase of institutional operations.

c. It can make its voice heard in the need for budgetary support.

The plan of using an organized office of institutional research has the advantage of fixing centralized responsibility for the use of funds for institutional research. The organized office of institutional research can coordinate the activities of various offices and agencies in institutional research by allocating funds from its budget to support their research projects.

The budget of the office of institutional research should, therefore, be adequate not only for the research projects it carries on itself, but to provide funds that may be allocated to other agencies and staff members to support their research on institutional problems.

There are several requirements of an agency given the task of directing the program of institutional research:

1. Competence to carry on research in higher education.

2. A reasonable knowledge of research already accomplished, to avoid needless or pointless repetition of studies.

3. A thorough knowledge of sources of general statistical data and other basic information about higher education.

4. Time enough to devote to the research activity. It cannot be done by a busy official with his left hand while his right hand is busy at other inescapable tasks. An adequate staff is also essential.

5. A deep-seated and abiding interest in research, and a faith in research as a process--there will be plenty of discouragements.

6. A cooperative spirit in working with others, including both faculty members and administrators.

Some Concluding Observations

The area of institutional research studies is as broad as the entire operation of the institution. No subject is sacred from investigation by research methods.

I will simply list some topics for institutional research:

1. The students
2. The alumni
3. The faculty
4. The curriculum
5. The instructional program
6. The library
7. Instructional materials
8. The physical plant

9. Research activities
10. Public services
11. The financing of the institution
12. The administrative structure and controls
13. Administrative policies and procedures

Perhaps the important consideration in developing an institutional research project is to have a feeling for it as a real problem. Don't undertake a study just because someone else suggests it as a good area for research.

It is important, moreover, to allow plenty of "lead" time to carry on the research, if the results are to be used in some practical application at a fixed date in the future.

Finally, we must remember that research does not make the decisions on courses of action. It only affords a basis on which sound decisions can be made. It does not supplant the need for sound administrative judgment, but only makes that judgment better informed and more intelligent.

Given the magnitude of the problems facing the trustees and the chief executives of our institutions, an adequate, well-organized institutional research program is a necessity for every college and university.